

When is enough enough?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I thought I had enough firewood in October to get us through our five cold months. Today, the pile looks smaller than it should be with three months to go.

If I run out, I'll have to slop around in March snow and April mud, cutting, splitting and hauling. This is less fun than it sounds.

Fundamental decisions on the farm are judged against one of three simple standards: more, less or enough.

Sometimes more is good; sometimes not. Most farmers, for example, would like more land, but not more mortgage debt; more income, but not more taxes.

There's always a tipping point after which the next shovelful of good turns into a big bad. We try to stop just short of where smart and efficient turn into dumb and wasteful.

You should, for instance, only load so much hay on a wagon. Stack on a bale after that, and the load collapses and falls off. You need to know when more has reached enough, and then stop adding.

As I've gotten older I aim more for enough, and not so much these days for more than enough. More than enough gets boomerangy in ways that I can't anticipate.

I'm also partial to outright less. I don't like to get too accustomed to surplus.

Enough has gotten a bad rap, because eyewitnesses often place it on edgy street corners in sketchy neighborhoods.

A friend in college liked to tell me that a "half-done job was plenty good enough." It wasn't, and he knew it. But he was a science kid who liked to scatter bad thoughts to see where they would sprout.

A common expression among collars, both blue and white, when finishing a job is: "Well, it's good enough for government work." This idea troubles me, because it approves shorting the taxpayer and fellow citizens of what's due them.

I try never to use this expression, but I've slipped now and then.

I remember John Glenn saying to me that an uncomfortable thought occurred to him as he was sweating in the Mercury spacecraft, just seconds before being the first American blasted into earth orbit—he recalled that the

Atlas rocket beneath him had been built by the “low bidder on a federal contract.” His life, he realized, depended on government work and no cut corners.

Years ago, I did a little project with a prominent Washington consultant who once said to me that if an article in The New York Times met the requirements of a sole-source federal work order, he would submit the article, never write a report, and then insist on payment. He remains a widely respected and prosperous figure in Washington while I look at Devil’s Backbone when I get up each morning in Blue Grass, Va.

The opposite of “plenty good enough” is “not good enough.”

I’ve run into two kinds of not good enough. The first is simple: something done fails to accomplish a measurable task. If you need to run a mile in six minutes or less to qualify for the big meet and the best you can do is nine minutes, that’s not good enough. You don’t get to go.

Human beings fail to achieve objectives like this all the time. We learn how to live with it. We accommodate ourselves to our limits.

But the other kind of not good enough is very subjective.

The book publishing world is populated by best sellers that were initially rejected by dozens of editors who are paid to spot talent.

Stephen King’s Carrie (“We are not interested in science fiction which deals with negative utopias. They do not sell.”); William Golding, Lord of the Flies (“an absurd and uninteresting fantasy which was rubbish and dull”); The Diary of Anne Frank (“The girl doesn’t, it seems to me, have a special perception or feeling which would lift that book above the ‘curiosity level.’”); J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone (all the big publishers rejected it; tiny Bloomsbury printed it because the CEO’s eight-year-old daughter loved it); George Orwell’s Animal Farm (“It is impossible to sell animal stories in the USA.”); Margaret Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind was rejected 38 times; John Grisham’s A Time to Kill was nixed by 12 publishers and 16 literary agents.

The subjective judgment of not good enough is often correct when it’s based on failing to master the mechanics or the craft of doing something. But if it’s just about like and dislike, who’s to say whose word is final?

It’s funny how the like/dislike opinions that evaluate us carry so much more weight than a failure to dunk a basketball or catch a falling baton every time. It’s hard to live with subjective judgments of “not good enough.”

Aiming to have not more than enough frees many of us; aiming to not do something “good enough” brings bad consequences that last a long time.

And that’s enough about enough already.

I better fetch up some more firewood, but not too much more.

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